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Fire chief of police, Sun says in filing

Reporter resigns; defamation cited

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The Jonesboro Sun is calling for the termination of the city's police chief after he posted comments about a reporter on Facebook, leading to her resignation over what she and the newspaper said were defamatory and false statements.

The newspaper sent a complaint to City Attorney Phillip Crego on Monday.

"Specifically, Chief [Michael] Yates has provided written, public commentary on Facebook and perhaps elsewhere that could give rise to a claim for defamation by Jonesboro reporter Sunshine Crump," the letter said.

The letter, drafted by John E. Tull III of the Little Rock law firm Quattlebaum, Grooms, Tull & Burrow, also said the Police Department had not recently been complying with the Arkansas Freedom of Information Act.

Crego did not return calls to his office Wednesday. Jonesboro Mayor Harold Perrin said he had met with the newspaper several times to discuss this issue and that the city was looking into it.

"We're still investigating and trying to pull all the facts together," he said. "I think I need to hold my comments right now because this is a personnel issue."

Crump, 38, had been reporting on police and courts at The Sun for about a year. Crump, who does not have a Facebook account, said she became aware of Yates' online comments about her after a friend told her.

Yates said he was exercising his right to free speech over the Internet.

"Just because I became a public servant, I didn't sacrifice my First Amendment right to protect free speech in my private capacity," Yates said. "I have my professional life and my personal life."

In excerpts of her letter of resignation that was published Tuesday in The Sun, Crump said she no longer felt safe at her job, that Yates' actions caused her stress and anxiety and that she would no longer "be put in a position of self-defense."

"I kept going for as long as I could — thinking something would happen or that this would stop — but instead things continued to get worse," Crump said in an interview. "I felt scared and threatened, and at the same time, it affected the newspaper."

In an article in The Sun on Wednesday, the paper's publisher called for Yates' termination.

"It's time for Mayor Harold Perrin to step up," publisher David Mosesso said in the article. "Any other entity would have already fired or suspended an employee who made these types of vindictive comments, and our city department heads should obviously be held to an even higher standard."

The Facebook comments were the final straw in a string of incidents between Crump and Yates, Crump said.

Crump said she was asked to leave a secured area in the Police Department twice, that Yates recorded his conversations with her and that he provided her with increasingly less public information.

After several stories written by Crump, the Police Department revised its policy on public information, said The Sun's editor, Chris Wessel.

According to the paper's letter, "the Jonesboro Police Department is providing different and additional information and documents to other media outlets."

Coupled with comments about the newspaper, such as "I intend to sink that ship ... torpedoes away!" Yates' behavior could constitute torturous interference with a business expectancy, the letter said.

Previously, the department provided the newspaper with police reports and probable cause affidavits between 8:30 and 11 a.m., in time for reporters to prepare for 2 p.m. probable cause hearings, and reporters were able to speak directly to detectives, Wessel said.

Recently, reporters have received the documents by 1:30 p.m. and must work through a public information officer, The Sun said.

Yates said revisions to the department's public information policies were not targeting Crump. Those procedures had been too loose, he said, and the revisions are a return to a formal procedure.

His decision to stiffen the rules were related to a video that was released to the media and didn't meet the standards for redaction allowed under the the Arkansas Freedom of Information Act, Yates said.

While newspaper administrators said they would prefer to return to a friendly, working relationship with the Police Department, they said they would consider legal action.

"Yates must be held accountable for his hatchet job of Sunshine Crump, for his efforts to damage The Sun and for his actions that have put the Jonesboro Police Department in such a bad light," Wessel wrote in an editorial planned for publication today.

"We will continue to aggressively pursue the public's right to information through all means necessary."